

Community and Cultural Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Tuesday, 30th October, 2007.

Present:- Councillors Small (Chair), Dhillon, Grewal, Jenkins, L Khan and Shine.

Co-opted Member Present:- Glynys Higgins

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Aziz and Dhaliwal.

PART I

17. Declarations of Interest

Councillors Small and Latif Khan declared a personal interest in agenda item 5 – ALMO Update, in that they were Board Members of People 1st (Slough) Ltd. Both Members stated that they would remain and speak during the consideration of this item.

18. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on the 18th September, 2007 were approved as a correct record.

19. Maintenance of Trees and Park Ground Maintenance within the Borough

The Head of Environmental Services and Quality outlined a report to update Members on issues surrounding the arboricultural service. The Officer discussed the areas of work that the arboricultural service covered which included the maintenance and pruning of trees. Members noted the arrangements for arboricultural budgets and that on occasion, tree planting could be funded by Section 106 planning agreements. It was noted that recruitment to the Community Tree Officer post would take place in November, 2007 and the temporary Tree Officer would continue to provide two days per week cover and remain in post until the permanent position was filled.

The Officer discussed service issues including the £10,000 cost of works carried out in relation to the trees that were lost during the high winds in January, 2007. Members noted emerging service issues that included cases where some owners of residential property bordering park land areas were complaining about the height of trees bordering their properties and also the encroachment of vegetation. It was noted that common law allowed neighbouring land owners to remove overhanging vegetation provided this did not result in serious damage to shrubs or trees and off-cuts could be returned to the landowner. A draft policy would be presented to Cabinet in early 2008 in order to deal with the overgrowth issue and it was recognised that some additional resources would be required to fund the related works.

Members raised a variety of questions as follows:-

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- The Officer was asked whether the Council would take enforcement action against a neighbour where roots and overgrown shrubbery was causing a problem for the neighbouring property. Members were advised that the tree service was not an enforcement agency and the Council would not take enforcement action against private owners, and was only involved in cases where there was a danger to the highway.
- A Member asked what action was taken in cases where trees were blocking daylight and was advised by the Officer that the Council would only intervene in areas where there was a health and safety or prevention of crime issue. It was noted that in some areas pruning work was being carried out so that CCTV cameras could work more effectively.
- A co-opted Member asked for the relevant contact phone number for Members of the public and was advised that the relevant Officer could be contacted on Slough 875255.
- In relation to Marunden Green a Member referred to an area of land that was 60m by 20m in size and in his opinion the area was severely overgrown. He advised that the Council had been informed of this problem in the past but nothing had been done. The Officer advised that the land in question belonged to People 1st and the Interim Director of Community and Cultural Services advised that he would look into this.
- A Member asked how many members of staff assisted the Tree Officer and was advised that this was a stand alone post but the physical work was done by Slough Accord. A Member asked who was responsible in a situation where a Council tenant was suffering from tree/overgrowth problems from a private tenant and Interim Director of Community and Cultural Services agreed that he would discuss this with the Head of People 1st and report back to the Member.
- A co-opted Member asked who was responsible in cases where there was an overgrowth of ivy and the building concerned was occupied partly by Council and partly by private tenants. The Officer advised that the growth of ivy could present problems on footways and buildings and People 1st estate managers should be consulted where problems existed.
- Members asked what the policy of People 1st was in relation to trees and shrubs and requested that a report on this be brought to the next Panel meeting.

Resolved -

- (a) That the report be noted and that the Panel supports the creation of a draft policy to deal with the issue of overgrown areas of tree planting and shrubbery.
- (b) That a report on the People 1st policy on the maintenance of trees and shrubs be submitted to the next meeting of the Panel.

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20. ALMO Update

The Interim Director of Community & Cultural Services provided a verbal update on the findings of the recent ALMO inspection and Members noted that the formal results of the inspection would not be received until the end of November. Feedback received had indicated that significant progress had been made since the last inspection and it was noted that more than 150 strengths had been identified as against 40 areas of identified weakness. It was noted that the inspection had highlighted that not enough progress had been made in the area of resident involvement and supported housing schemes did not comply with the requirements of the Disability Act. It was anticipated that £200,000 may be needed to correct these shortcomings. Members were advised that in relation to the customer handling centre the 88% target had not been met and in the month before the visit the target had slipped to below 70%. The Officer was confident however that significant progress had been made and the ALMO would be advised at the end of November whether it had achieved two stars. Members were advised that if this rating was not achieved then an appeal could be lodged which would take two to three months, or a request could be made for the ALMO to be re-inspected in six months time. The Officer suggested that the Panel may wish to consider details of the inspection in depth.

Resolved - That a report on the findings of the ALMO inspection would be reported to the Panel in January, 2008.

21. Customer Service Centre - Performance Update

The Customer Service Centre Manager outlined statistics relating to the call centre trends, including queuing times, call volumes answered and offered, and average queuing times. The Officer advised that she had worked hard to address issues of concern and referred to specific areas that were identified during the recent ALMO inspection. Members noted that the statistics submitted were not designed specifically for the Panel meeting and that these could be presented in a re-designed format for a future meeting.

Members noted the submitted statistics and raised a number of concerns as follows:-

- A Member advised that when making a call to the Council he did not want to press a selection of buttons or have to wait 15 or 20 minutes for someone to answer his call.
- A Member asked what effort was being made to inform the public about ways in which they could contact the Council by e-mail. The Officer advised that work was being done in this area and it was also noted that within two or three years it may be possible to have digital interaction with the Customer Service Centre.
- A Member was worried about members of the public not being able to access the CSC in a reasonable time.

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- A Member advised that she had stopped calling the CSC because it always took over 20 minutes to have her call answered. She now visited Landmark Place personally to avoid calling.
- A Member stated that when she had phoned the CSC the call duration was over 20 minutes and during that time she was given a verbal recorded apology six times. She advised that her neighbour had visited MyCouncil and it took five hours to be seen and have her query resolved.
- A Member advised that many people had told her they could not get through to the CSC so did not bother to try. She had tried personally and it took over 20 minutes and was an annoying experience. She noted that the recorded message offered a number of numbers to press; for example a caller could push a button if they wanted to speak to People 1st. She was concerned that in many cases members of the public would not be aware that their particular query would for example be dealt with by People 1st. These individuals were therefore forced wait in a queue for an operator to answer the call.
- A member was concerned that the Britwell satellite office did not offer customer satisfaction and the building was inadequate with no room for prams and narrow passageways. The Officer replied that the premises complied with all statutory requirements and was also subjected to a rigorous test as part of the ALMO inspection. The only area cited as problematic was in relation to the door of the premises. The Officer advised that the number of customers using the satellite office had not reduced.

The Officer advised that she had recruited a further nine members of staff who would soon be working on the shop floor. This would increase the number of staff to 55. Members were advised however that there was a limited budget and the customer experience two years earlier was less satisfactory than it was now.

Members were not convinced that the members of the public were always receiving good service from the Customer Service Centre and requested that a report on the performance of the Centre be considered at future meetings of the Panel.

Resolved - That a Customer Service Centre performance report be submitted to future meetings of the Panel and added to the work programme.

22. ALMO Performance at a Glance to the 30th September, 2007

The Housing Performance Manager, Community and Culture, outlined a monthly update flier showing performance against the 12 key business functions. It was noted that seven indicators had improved but that the average relet for void properties had gone down. Members discussed the

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trends relating to relet properties, repairs and the numbers of properties receiving decent homes work. A Member questioned whether People 1st were responsible for the internal decoration of properties and the Officer advised that he would obtain this information.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

23. Work Programme

The work programme was amended as follows:-

- People 1st's policy in relation to the maintenance of trees and shrubs was added to the programme.
- The outcome of the ALMO inspection was added to the programme for the meeting in January, 2008.
- A report on the performance of the Customer Service Centre was added to the programme for each future meeting of the Panel.
- The agenda items relating to the closure of shops within the Borough and the update relating to the Housing Revenue Account funding of the Neighbourhood Wardens Scheme were moved to the unprogrammed section of the work programme.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 10.05 p.m.)

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